

U.S. researcher touts cleaner oilsands extraction process

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Photograph by: Chris Schwarz, Edmonton Journal

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Scientists at Penn State University say their closed system using ionic liquids — salt in a liquid state — to separate the heavy, viscous oil found in Western Canada from sand uses less energy than current systems and does not create toxic waste water.

“Our process could potentially get rid of those waste water ponds which can be dangerous to the environment, especially the wildlife in the area,” said Paul Painter, the head of the project and a professor of polymer science. “And we think it could potentially be cheaper than the way they extract the oil now.”

Painter said Sunday he was motivated to develop his technique after reading about the deaths of 1,600 ducks in a Syncrude tailings pond in Alberta in 2008.

The photographs of oil-coated ducks have become a lasting image of Canada's oilsands industry, and

